

Loirely Burt MP's response to council consultation on proposed reorganisation of school places in Shirley

Introduction

This short report is the result of my own consultation with the Education Authority, head teachers, governors and parents at St James, Shirley Heath and Woodlands Schools.

I would like to thank everyone who took the time to meet me and to write to me. I hope this report presents a fair reflection of the range of views expressed in this very difficult situation.

The current situation

The low pupil roll at St James has rightly necessitated a consultation into the future of the school. However, whatever happens to St James will have repercussions on other schools in the area, but mainly on Shirley Heath and Woodlands.

While overall Shirley schools are 92% full, the spare capacity is largely concentrated at St James. It is very regrettable that this situation has been allowed to develop and that the LEA has reached this stage three years after the problem was first identified.

It has been reported to me that the LEA have been informing prospective parents that St James may close, and I expect the numbers of parents subscribing for next year to continue the downward trend.

That said, I wish to place on record that no parent or teacher has criticised the quality of teaching at St James: their SATS results bear evidence of that. This week a new one day OFSTED visit will take place, and I expect the report to be favourable.

The focus now should be on what to do for the best future of the children, not to ascribe blame for what happened in the past.

The LEA has proposed three options based on its own forecasts of pupil numbers for the future.

If one accepts the LEA forecasts there is insufficient demand in the local area to accommodate a new infant stream which would be created if St James became a single stream infant and junior school.

Parents at Woodlands and Shirley Heath have been anxious to point out that if option 3, which is favoured by St James parents' action group, is adopted this would create a shortfall in numbers at both schools and potentially threaten their viability in the future.

The consensus at the Woodlands and Shirley Heath parents' meetings was that it would be better to 'grasp the nettle' and lose St James because fewer children would be affected and this would protect their own schools' viability for the future.

The Shirley Heath Head Teacher has also made the point that they have the capacity to accommodate St James' children in proper classrooms without recourse to portacabins or overcrowding existing classes.

However, I would respectfully suggest that the LEA assumptions upon which the three options are based bear further scrutiny.

Challenge to demographic forecasts and LEA assumptions

It has to be said that demographic forecasts are notoriously uncertain given their base is generally out of date. They are subject to short term fluctuations due to inward or outward migration.

Has the LEA factored in the potential release of family homes due to the growing age profile of the population in Shirley? (ie older people moving into more appropriate accommodation releasing family homes for young families).

Currently 50% of the children at St James are from outside Shirley West. They, like all infant and junior combined CE schools attract from a much wider area. The LEA has not sought to establish the demand for a CE Infants school outside Shirley West. This means that there is an underestimate of demand for a CE Infant school.

There is evidence that there is a demand for a CE Infants and Junior in this locality from families with recently baptised children and with children at pre-school groups. St Patrick's, St Margaret's and St Alphege schools are all full. A newly created CE Infants School would provide for children unable to access St Alphege and St Margaret's.

A few years ago St James were turning children away they were so successful. With better marketing there is no reason why they could not enjoy similar success again. Schools appear to enjoy (or not) cycles of success. It is unfortunate for St James that they seem to be at the bottom of their cycle, helped by an unfavourable OFSTED report two years ago.

Evidence from a doctor's practice, and the belief of the Diocese, is that some dramatic demographic changes are taking place across the boundary in Birmingham. This is adding to demand for faith schools in areas where there is no provision. Moreover those demographic changes are inevitably working their way into Shirley. Birmingham is the youngest City in Europe as measured by its numbers under 15 years old.

Clearly we do not want to subsidise Birmingham children, but it could help as a stop gap measure to keep the school viable if future demand was forecast. It would be far cheaper to bear some additional cost now than have to build a whole new school in five years time.

If St James were to disappear a huge gap would appear in CE based education, with no CE School serving Shirley, and adjoining areas. This would obviously be contrary to the ethos of LEA policy and parental choice.

I would also be grateful to know whether potential new admissions have been factored into the figures from the following new housing developments:

1/ The Grange - Haslucks Green Road

2/ The Plant Centre - Haslucks Green Road - Closing down for new housing estate together with compulsory purchase of houses and bungalows in Haslucks Green Road for proposed new housing estate

3/ Corner of Aqueduct Road, Solihull Lodge

4/ Eversleigh, Aqueduct Road next to Mill Lodge School

5/ Do-it-All - Stanway Road

6/ Heart of Shirley plans

7/ Danford Court Development

8/ Transco Storage Depot - closed and notices of Laing Homes Development

9/ The Powergen Site

The LEA figures already show that Woodlands numbers are growing again by 2008 and 2009 without any consideration of the above impacts.

It is the very strong view of the Governing Body and parents of St James that the demographic and other assumptions of the LEA are flawed with the conclusion that the impact of a new CE Infant School on Woodlands has been exaggerated, and the demand for a CE Infant School badly underestimated.

They also point out the irony that St James is the only school at the heart of the Shirley regeneration process: we would lose the school that had been at the 'Heart of Shirley' for 160 years.

Other options

If the LEA predictions can be shown to be less than comprehensive, Option 3 could be best.

However, another option might be to have a 'federation' which would twin St James with St Patrick's CE School which I understand has recently had a request for an additional tier of entry turned down. Ways of working this would have to be explored, but rather than seeing the closure of St James I would respectfully suggest this is certainly worth examining.

Conclusion

If the observations above are correct, by 2010/11 junior numbers will be growing again raising the very strong likelihood that if St James Junior School were closed new provision would be required within 5-6 years. What would be the sense of closing a school in these circumstances?

It is my recommendation that the LEA should postpone any decision until a full statistical analysis incorporating the factors outlined above has been undertaken.

I would also be grateful if the St Patrick's option could also be explored.

Then and only then will we be in a position to determine the best course of action for the children of Shirley.